

How an American Girl Started a World-Wide Squabble Over Boccaccio

Staid Reformers, Impresarios, Purists, Students of the Classics and Preachers at Loggerheads

Since Demure Miss Kershaw Decided: "If I Can't Wear Tights, I Can Quit"

The Decameron Idea of Princess Perdita and Her Clothes. (From the Original Illustration by Louis Chalon.)



Miss Margaret Bannerman Attired Only in Her Luxurious Theatrical Wig. This Is the Lady Godiva Style Costume She Wears on the Stage in the Character of Perdita, the Shipwrecked Princess—a Style Miss Kershaw Indignantly Declined to Introduce.

TO what extent does a classic background justify nudity on the modern stage?

And is Boccaccio's Decameron a great classic, after all—or is it an "immoral and indecent" book, as some recent modern courts have held?

A new storm is now raging on this point in America and England. Its centre is the stage of the famous old Drury Lane Theatre in London, where an elaborate spectacle called "Decameron Nights" is being presented.

The play is a free adaptation of the story in the Decameron called "The Souldan of Babylon," with added parts from other of Boccaccio's tales which had oriental settings.

The plot involves a beautiful princess, who is cast up naked on the rocks after a shipwreck, and a sultan's son, who falls in love with her. The role of the princess, Perdita, was originally given to an American actress—Willette Kershaw. Miss Ker-

shaw insisted on playing the role in tights and with a long flowing wig.

London critics said princesses who were cast up naked by the sea did not wear tights. The management of the theatre thought the criticism sound. Miss Kershaw did not. "The Decameron may be a classic," she is reported to have said, "but, classic or no classic, I refuse to make it an excuse for showing myself bare to nightly audiences in London!"

"The name of this play," reported the managers, "is 'Decameron Nights'—not 'Decameron Tights'."

"If I can't wear tights, at least I can quit," Miss Kershaw is reported to have said finally, and quit she did.

Whereupon the role was taken over by Margaret Bannerman, an English beauty and stage star, who retained the wig but discarded the tights, and is now appearing nightly in the role of Perdita, garbed like Lady Godiva only in her flowing tresses.

"Fine," say the London critics. "Miss Kershaw was a pride with the narrow prejudices of a provincial school teacher. Miss Bannerman is a heroine who sacrifices modesty—if, indeed, modesty is sacrificed at all—on the high altar of classic art."



Miss Willette Kershaw Who Insisted That a Shipwrecked Princess Without Clothes Was Simply Unthinkable so Far as She, Personally, Was Concerned.

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Americans have no respect for classics or traditions, anyway."

"Not so," say the reformers in America. "We are proud of Miss Kershaw as an American girl, and if she had to go naked on the stage to compete with brazen European actresses, she did quite right to resign the role. Besides, the Decameron is an immoral book and ought to be suppressed, and never was a classic."

The first published rumor of the change in cast had it that Miss Bannerman not only would wear no tights but that she had had her hair bobbed for the part, and wouldn't wear any wig at all. This, however, proved to be exaggerated. Miss Bannerman is wearing a flowing wig, but it is shorter than the one worn by Miss Kershaw, and the wig is the only thing she wears.

"Miss Kershaw," declared Miss Bannerman, "got a wig that reached practically to her ankles. My tresses are shorter, but I do not think there is any need of fleshings. I am placed on the rock by my maid, who arranges the wig about me, furnishing sufficient covering, I think, and carrying out the illusion of a stark shipwrecked woman on the rock. The scene lasts but a flash. The monk throws a cloak over me, which I carefully pin, and I am carried into the monastery. There is no suggestiveness in the part as I play it—it is simply naturalism in art."

Is Miss Bannerman right or was Miss Kershaw right?

The episode has done much to revive the larger controversy over the status of the Decameron itself.

By a double coincidence, this controversy occurs just as additional interest is revived in Boccaccio by the discovery of his bones in a house in Certaldo, near Florence, and by a court decision in Ohio, in which a bookseller has been convicted and fined \$1,000 for the interstate shipment of copies of the Decameron by express.

Boccaccio's standing in America to-day before the law is uncertain. In most States copies of the Decameron are carried in the public libraries, and may be bought openly in leading bookstores of large cities. But, on the other hand, whenever a dealer sends

Riccardo and Lady Teodora, an Episode Presented in the Dramatized Version of Decameron Nights at Drury Lane.

one of the books through the mails or ships it from one state to another, he runs the risk of being hauled up in the courts for circulating indecent literature.

Whatever the modern vice crusaders may think of Boccaccio, it is certain that he was not regarded as an indecent writer in his own day and time. In addition to being recognized as a literary genius, he was what is to-day known as a "prominent citizen."

He lived in the fourteenth century, in Florence, during the early period of the Renaissance. His father was a prosperous merchant and city official (commerce was regarded as highly respectable by the Italians, and even the Medici engaged in it), and his mother was a French lady. In those days there was a difference between the words "woman" and "lady." His private tutor was Giovanni da Strada, the best grammarian in Tuscany. He traveled and studied widely and moved in the highest circles. His dearest friend was the poet, Petrarch.

His lady-love, celebrated in poetry under the name of Fiammetta, was Maria, daughter of the King of Naples. He himself became an official of the Florentine republic. He was so highly regarded by the clergy that he lectured on Dante's "Divine Comedy" in a Florentine church. Like practically all men of his period, his private life was by no means a model for Puritans, but he died "in the odor of sanctity" and bequeathed many of his possessions, including a magnificent library, to the Convent of the Holy Ghost.

And whatever modern court ruling may decide with reference to the question of whether or not Boccaccio is immoral, he will continue to remain a classic. Morals are one thing and art is another. They may convict Boccaccio as immoral, but they can never knock him off his pedestal as one of the six greatest prose writers who ever put quill to paper.

They can't bar the Encyclopaedia Britannica from the mails, and the Encyclopaedia, which is not given to misplaced fulsome praise, awards Boccaccio four solid pages of superlatives. It compares him with Dante and calls him the "father of Italian prose." It says his work marks the "rise of Italian literature" and will be "a standard and model" for all time. His style, it says, has "grace, elegance, beauty—a new idiom, flexible and tender."

The description of the plague in Florence, with which Boccaccio opens his Decameron, the Encyclopaedia says, is a "masterpiece of epic grandeur and vividness." It remarks, incidentally, that the work contains passages ranging from "the highest pathos and beauty to the coarsest licentiousness."

The "coarse licentiousness" is there, as every reader of Boccaccio knows, but what many readers do not know is that practically all writers of that period were "coarse and licentious" in spots, and that the truth is that as writers went in those days he was notably delicate, and that his fame endured "simply because most of his stories could be read in later days by decent people, while most of those told by his contemporaries could not, and soon passed into oblivion."